

THE ROLE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN DEVELOPING EFL LEARNERS' SPEAKING SKILLS

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АННОТАЦИЯ:

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become an increasingly important technology in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, particularly in the development of learners' speaking skills. Traditional speaking instruction may be limited by insufficient classroom time, learners' fear of making mistakes, and unequal opportunities for individual practice. AI-powered chatbots, conversational agents, speech-recognition systems, and intelligent language-learning platforms provide learners with opportunities to practise English through interactive and personalized communication. This article examines the role of Artificial Intelligence in developing EFL learners' speaking skills, with particular attention to speaking fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, willingness to communicate, and confidence. Drawing on recent empirical studies and systematic reviews, the article discusses the potential benefits and limitations of AI-mediated speaking practice. Existing evidence indicates that AI-supported speaking activities can improve learners' speaking performance and willingness to communicate while reducing speaking anxiety. However, excessive dependence on AI, limitations in speech recognition, restricted emotional interaction, and concerns about learner autonomy demonstrate that AI should complement rather than replace teachers and human communication. The article concludes that the most effective use of AI in EFL speaking education requires purposeful

*pedagogical integration, teacher guidance,
learner autonomy, and opportunities for authentic
human interaction.*

Introduction

Speaking is one of the most important components of second and foreign language learning because it enables learners to use language for communication in academic, professional, and everyday situations. However, developing effective speaking skills can be challenging for EFL learners. Students may understand grammatical rules and possess sufficient vocabulary but still experience difficulties when they are required to speak spontaneously. Fear of making mistakes, limited classroom practice, lack of confidence, and speaking anxiety can prevent learners from actively participating in oral communication. The development of Artificial Intelligence has introduced new possibilities for addressing some of these challenges. AI-powered conversational systems can provide learners with opportunities to communicate in English outside the traditional classroom. Unlike conventional language-learning software, conversational AI can respond to learners' spoken or written input and create interactive exchanges. Recent research has therefore begun to investigate whether AI can contribute to the development of speaking proficiency. One important empirical study involved 65 EFL learners divided between an AI-mediated group and a face-to-face group. The AI group participated in interactive speaking activities using an AI chatbot, while the control group participated in conventional peer interaction. The researchers used IELTS speaking tests and a willingness-to-communicate scale. The findings indicated that AI-mediated speaking activities were more effective in improving speaking skills and willingness to communicate, and participants generally expressed positive attitudes toward the AI-supported activities. [6.45]

Similarly, a 2024 systematic review examined 24 empirical studies published between 2017 and 2023 concerning AI-powered chatbots in English-speaking learning. The review reported potential benefits including improved pronunciation, reduced speaking anxiety, increased confidence, engagement, motivation, and speaking outcomes.

At the same time, the researchers emphasized that research in this area was still developing and required further empirical investigation. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to examine the role of Artificial Intelligence in developing EFL learners' speaking skills and to identify both the educational opportunities and limitations associated with AI-mediated speaking practice.[1.28]

1. Artificial Intelligence in EFL Education

Artificial Intelligence refers to computational technologies capable of performing tasks that normally require aspects of human intelligence, such as language processing, prediction, interaction, and feedback. In language education, AI can be incorporated into intelligent

tutoring systems, automated speech-recognition applications, conversational chatbots, pronunciation tools, and generative AI systems.

AI systems can generate responses based on learners' input and can therefore create a more interactive environment than traditional exercises based only on predetermined answers. For EFL learners, this is particularly relevant because speaking development requires repeated opportunities to produce language. AI tools can provide additional opportunities for practice when a teacher or speaking partner is not immediately available.

A systematic review of 30 empirical studies published between 2020 and 2024 found that AI-driven chatbots produced notable improvements across language skills, with particularly positive results reported for speaking and writing. The review identified real-time feedback, increased opportunities for practice, and anxiety reduction as important potential mechanisms. However, it also noted that AI systems cannot fully reproduce the emotional and contextual complexity of human communication.

Thus, AI should not simply be viewed as a replacement for traditional language teaching. Rather, it can function as an additional learning environment in which students receive more opportunities to practise language.[3.12]

2. AI and Speaking Fluency

Fluency is a central component of successful oral communication. EFL learners frequently experience pauses, hesitation, repetition, and difficulty with organizing ideas while speaking. These problems may be related not only to linguistic knowledge but also to limited opportunities for spontaneous communication.

AI-mediated interaction can provide learners with repeated opportunities to produce spoken English. Because learners can interact with AI without requiring another human participant, they can practise at their own pace and repeat activities when necessary.

Research by Du and Daniel demonstrated that AI-mediated interactive speaking activities could positively affect EFL learners' speaking skills. Their experimental study compared AI-mediated interaction with face-to-face peer interaction and reported stronger improvements in the AI group. [6.47]

AI can also allow learners to practise similar speaking tasks multiple times. For example, a learner may first discuss a familiar topic such as hobbies and subsequently repeat the task after receiving feedback. This repeated production may help learners become more comfortable with spontaneous speech.

However, fluency should not be understood simply as the ability to produce speech quickly. Effective fluency also requires coherence, appropriate vocabulary, grammatical control, pronunciation, and interactional competence. Therefore, AI-based fluency activities should be designed around meaningful communicative tasks rather than mechanical repetition.

3. AI and Pronunciation Development

Pronunciation is another area in which AI can provide valuable assistance. Speech-

recognition technologies can analyse learners' spoken production and provide feedback on pronunciation. Such technologies can be especially useful for learners who have limited access to native or highly proficient English-speaking partners.

The systematic review by Du and Daniel identified pronunciation improvement as one of the benefits reported across studies of AI-powered chatbots for EFL speaking practice. [1.10]

AI pronunciation systems can potentially help learners identify pronunciation problems that they may not notice themselves. For example, learners can receive feedback on individual sounds, word pronunciation, stress, or other aspects of oral production.

Nevertheless, automated pronunciation feedback should be interpreted carefully. Speech-recognition systems may misunderstand accents, background noise, or non-standard pronunciation. Therefore, AI-generated pronunciation feedback should be treated as supplementary rather than as an unquestionable evaluation of a learner's speaking ability.

4. AI, Vocabulary and Grammatical Accuracy

Speaking proficiency depends considerably on learners' ability to access appropriate vocabulary and construct grammatically understandable sentences. AI conversational systems can expose learners to vocabulary in communicative contexts rather than presenting words in isolation.

During an AI conversation, learners may encounter unfamiliar expressions and subsequently use them in their own responses. AI can also generate follow-up questions that encourage learners to apply newly acquired vocabulary.

Furthermore, conversational AI can provide corrections or explanations concerning grammatical errors. This may help learners recognize recurring problems in their speech and encourage self-correction.

However, immediate correction is not always pedagogically desirable. If an AI system interrupts every communicative attempt with corrections, learners may become overly focused on accuracy instead of meaning. Consequently, AI speaking activities should balance fluency and accuracy, depending on the learning objective.[3.39]

5. AI and Willingness to Communicate

Willingness to Communicate (WTC) is particularly important in EFL education because possessing linguistic knowledge does not automatically mean that a learner will use the language.

Learners who are afraid of making mistakes may remain silent even when they know the correct answer. AI-mediated communication can provide an alternative environment in which learners can practise without the social pressure associated with speaking in front of classmates.

Research involving AI-mediated speaking activities found positive effects on learners' willingness to communicate. Another 2024 study involving 131 Chinese EFL university students reported increased WTC following AI-speaking-assistant intervention. [4.16]

6. Challenges and Limitations of AI in Speaking Education

Despite its potential benefits, AI does not provide a perfect solution for developing speaking skills.

6.1. Excessive dependence on AI

One important concern is learner dependence on AI. If students rely excessively on automated assistance, they may become less willing to solve communicative problems independently.

The 2025 study by Ebadi specifically identified a potential trade-off between automation and learner autonomy. Although AI-supported speaking activities provided learner-centered benefits, the researchers also reported concerns about excessive reliance on AI and reduced critical evaluation. [2.27]

6.2. Limited emotional and social interaction

Human communication involves emotions, cultural knowledge, gestures, facial expressions, social relationships, and contextual interpretation. AI can simulate conversation, but it cannot completely reproduce the richness of human interpersonal communication.

The 2025 systematic review of AI-driven chatbots similarly noted limitations in reproducing human-like emotional engagement and nuanced communication. [3.15]

6.3. Risk of replacing rather than supporting human interaction

Speaking is ultimately a social skill. Students therefore need opportunities to communicate with teachers, classmates, and other English users. AI should increase opportunities for practice rather than eliminate human interaction.

The strongest pedagogical model is therefore likely to be a hybrid model, in which AI provides additional practice while teachers and peers provide authentic human communication.

7. Challenges of English Language Learning in the Uzbek Educational Context.

English language learners in Uzbekistan encounter a range of linguistic, pedagogical, and psychological challenges that may influence their language development. One significant issue is the limited opportunity to use English in authentic communicative situations outside the classroom. Although learners may acquire grammatical knowledge and vocabulary through formal instruction, they may struggle to apply this knowledge spontaneously in real-life conversations. This highlights the distinction between knowing a language and using it effectively for communication.

Another challenge concerns the influence of learners' first language on English acquisition. Differences between Uzbek and English phonological and grammatical systems may contribute to difficulties with pronunciation, article usage, verb tenses, and sentence structure. Research focusing on Uzbek learners has examined vocabulary acquisition and pronunciation as areas requiring targeted instructional support. Furthermore, an overemphasis on grammatical accuracy and examination-oriented tasks, where present, may leave insufficient time for communicative activities that promote fluency and interaction.

Psychological factors also deserve attention. Fear of making mistakes, limited speaking confidence, and anxiety about peer evaluation may discourage learners from participating actively in classroom discussions. At the same time, large classes and limited opportunities for individual feedback can make it difficult for teachers to address learners' specific needs consistently.

In this context, artificial intelligence (AI) may offer additional opportunities for language practice. AI-supported tools can provide simulated conversations, vocabulary exercises, pronunciation practice, and immediate feedback on selected aspects of language use. These tools may help learners practise independently and at their own pace. However, their effectiveness depends on the accuracy of feedback, the learners' digital literacy, access to suitable technology, and the integration of AI into well-designed teaching activities. Therefore, AI should be viewed as a complementary educational resource rather than a replacement for teachers or authentic human interaction.

8. Pedagogical Recommendations

Based on the literature reviewed in this article, several recommendations can be made for EFL teachers.

First, teachers should use AI with clearly defined speaking objectives. Instead of asking students simply to "talk to AI," teachers can design structured activities such as role plays, interviews, debates, problem-solving tasks, and discussions.

Second, AI should be used to increase speaking practice rather than replace classroom communication. Students should have opportunities to transfer what they practise with AI into real human interaction.

Third, learners should be encouraged to evaluate AI feedback critically. Teachers can ask students to identify whether an AI correction is accurate and explain why.

Fourth, AI can be particularly useful for learners experiencing speaking anxiety. Students can initially practise privately with AI and later participate in pair or group activities.

Finally, teachers should monitor students' AI use and encourage learner autonomy. The purpose of AI should be to help students become more independent language users rather than permanently dependent on automated assistance.[6.12]

Conclusion

Artificial Intelligence has created new opportunities for developing EFL learners' speaking skills. AI-powered chatbots, conversational agents, and speech-recognition technologies can provide learners with additional opportunities to practise English, receive feedback, develop pronunciation and fluency, and participate in communication with reduced anxiety.

Recent empirical research provides evidence that AI-mediated speaking activities can improve speaking performance and willingness to communicate. Studies have also reported reductions in speaking anxiety and increases in enjoyment and confidence. [1.18]

Nevertheless, AI has important limitations. Speech-recognition errors, restricted emotional interaction, excessive dependence, and potential reductions in learner autonomy

mean that AI should not replace teachers or authentic human communication. Instead, AI should be integrated into EFL instruction as a supplementary tool.

The most effective approach is therefore a balanced model in which AI provides frequent, personalized and low-pressure speaking practice, while teachers provide pedagogical guidance, feedback, motivation, and authentic human interaction. Future empirical research, particularly research involving larger and more diverse EFL populations, is needed to determine how different AI technologies influence specific dimensions of speaking proficiency. [4.9]

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